Ur-Fascism

Umberto Eco
NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS -- JUNE 22, 1995 ISSUE

In 1942, at the age of ten, I received the First Provincial Award of Ludi Juveniles (a voluntary, compulsory competition for young Italian Fascists—that is, for every young Italian). I elaborated with rhetorical skill on the subject "Should we die for the glory of Mussolini and the immortal destiny of Italy?" My answer was positive. I was a smart boy.

I spent two of my early years among the SS, Fascists, Republicans, and partisans shooting at one another, and I learned how to dodge bullets. It was good exercise.

In April 1945, the partisans took over in Milan. Two days later they arrived in the small town where I was living at the time. It was a moment of joy. The main square was crowded with people singing and waving flags, calling in loud voices for Mimo, the partisan leader of that area. A former *maresciallo* of the Carabinieri, Mimo joined the supporters of General Badoglio, Mussolini's successor, and lost a leg during one of the first clashes with Mussolini's remaining forces. Mimo showed up on the balcony of the city hall, pale, leaning on his crutch, and with one hand tried to calm the crowd. I was waiting for his speech because my whole childhood had been marked by the great historic speeches of Mussolini, whose most significant passages we memorized in school. Silence. Mimo spoke in a hoarse voice, barely audible. He said: "Citizens, friends. After so many painful sacrifices … here we are. Glory to those who have fallen for freedom." And that was it. He went back inside. The crowd yelled, the partisans raised their guns and fired festive volleys. We kids hurried to pick up the shells, precious items, but I had also learned that freedom of speech means freedom from rhetoric.

A few days later I saw the first American soldiers. They were African Americans. The first Yankee I met was a black man, Joseph, who introduced me to the marvels of Dick Tracy and Li'l Abner. His comic books were brightly colored and smelled good.

One of the officers (Major or Captain Muddy) was a guest in the villa of a family whose two daughters were my schoolmates. I met him in their garden where some ladies, surrounding Captain Muddy, talked in tentative French. Captain Muddy knew some French, too. My first image of American liberators was thus—after so many palefaces in black shirts—that of a cultivated black man in a yellow-green uniform saying: "*Oui, merci beaucoup, Madame, moi aussi j'aime le champagne*…" Unfortunately there was no champagne, but Captain Muddy gave me my first piece of Wrigley's Spearmint and I started chewing all day long. At night I put my wad in a water glass, so it would be fresh for the next day.

In May we heard that the war was over. Peace gave me a curious sensation. I had been told that permanent warfare was the normal condition for a young Italian. In the following months I discovered that the Resistance was not only a local phenomenon but a European one. I learned new, exciting words like *réseau, maquis, armée secrète, Rote Kapelle,* Warsaw ghetto. I saw the first photographs of the Holocaust, thus understanding the meaning before knowing the word. I realized what we were liberated from.

In my country today there are people who are wondering if the Resistance had a real military impact on the course of the war. For my generation this question is irrelevant: we immediately understood the moral and psychological meaning of the Resistance. For us it was a point of pride to know that we Europeans did not wait passively for liberation. And for the young Americans who were paying with their blood for our restored freedom it meant something to know that behind the firing lines there were Europeans paying their own debt in advance.

In my country today there are those who are saying that the myth of the Resistance was a Communist lie. It is true that the Communists exploited the Resistance as if it were their personal property, since they played a prime role in it; but I remember partisans with kerchiefs of different colors. Sticking close to the radio, I spent my nights—the windows closed, the blackout making the small space around the set a lone luminous halo—listening to the messages sent by the Voice of London to the partisans. They were cryptic and poetic at the same time (*The sun also rises, The roses will bloom*) and most of them were "*messaggi per la Franchi*." Somebody whispered to me that Franchi was the leader of the most powerful clandestine network in northwestern Italy, a man of legendary courage. Franchi became my hero. Franchi (whose real name was Edgardo Sogno) was a monarchist, so strongly anti-Communist that after the war he joined very right-wing groups, and was charged with collaborating in a project for a reactionary coup d'état. Who cares? Sogno still remains the dream hero of my childhood. Liberation was a common deed for people of different colors.

In my country today there are some who say that the War of Liberation was a tragic period of division, and that all we need is national reconciliation. The memory of those terrible years should be repressed, *refoulée, verdrängt*. But *Verdrängung* causes neurosis. If reconciliation means compassion and respect for all those who fought their own war in good faith, to forgive does not mean to forget. I can even admit that Eichmann sincerely believed in his mission, but I cannot say, "OK, come back and do it again." We are here to remember what happened and solemnly say that "They" must not do it again.

But who are They?

If we still think of the totalitarian governments that ruled Europe before the Second World War we can easily say that it would be difficult for them to reappear in the same form in different historical circumstances. If Mussolini's fascism was based upon the idea of a charismatic ruler, on corporatism, on the utopia of the Imperial Fate of Rome, on an imperialistic will to conquer new territories, on an exacerbated nationalism, on the ideal of an entire nation regimented in black shirts, on the rejection of parliamentary democracy, on anti-Semitism, then I have no difficulty in acknowledging that today the Italian Alleanza Nazionale, born from the postwar Fascist Party, MSI, and certainly a right-wing party, has by now very little to do with the old fascism. In the same vein, even though I am much concerned about the various Nazi-like movements that have arisen here and there in Europe, including Russia, I do not think that Nazism, in its original form, is about to reappear as a nationwide movement.

Nevertheless, even though political regimes can be overthrown, and ideologies can be criticized and disowned, behind a regime and its ideology there is always a way of thinking and feeling, a group of cultural habits, of obscure instincts and unfathomable drives. Is there still another ghost stalking Europe (not to speak of other parts of the world)?

Ionesco once said that "only words count and the rest is mere chattering." Linguistic habits are frequently important symptoms of underlying feelings. Thus it is worth asking why not only the Resistance but the Second World War was generally defined throughout the world as a struggle against fascism. If you reread Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* you will discover that Robert Jordan identifies his enemies with Fascists, even when he thinks of the Spanish Falangists. And for FDR, "The victory of the American people and their allies will be a victory against fascism and the dead hand of despotism it represents."

During World War II, the Americans who took part in the Spanish war were called "premature anti-fascists"—meaning that fighting against Hitler in the Forties was a moral duty for every good American, but fighting against Franco too early, in the Thirties, smelled sour because it was mainly done by Communists and other leftists. … Why was an expression like *fascist pig* used by American radicals thirty years later to refer to a cop who did not approve of their smoking habits? Why didn't they say: *Cagoulard pig, Falangist pig, Ustashe pig, Quisling pig, Nazi pig*?

Mein Kampf is a manifesto of a complete political program. Nazism had a theory of racism and of the Aryan chosen people, a precise notion of degenerate art, *entartete Kunst*, a philosophy of the will to power and of the *Ubermensch*. Nazism was decidedly anti-Christian and neo-pagan, while Stalin's *Diamat* (the official version of Soviet Marxism) was blatantly materialistic and atheistic. If by totalitarianism one means a regime that subordinates every act of the individual to the state and to its ideology, then both Nazism and Stalinism were true totalitarian regimes.

Italian fascism was certainly a dictatorship, but it was not totally totalitarian, not because of its mildness but rather because of the philosophical weakness of its ideology. Contrary to common opinion, fascism in Italy had no special philosophy. The article on fascism signed by Mussolini in the *Treccani Encyclopedia* was written or basically inspired by Giovanni Gentile, but it reflected a late-Hegelian notion of the Absolute and Ethical State which was never fully realized by Mussolini. Mussolini did not have any philosophy: he had only rhetoric. He was a militant atheist at the beginning and later signed the Convention with the Church and welcomed the bishops who blessed the Fascist pennants. In his early anticlerical years, according to a likely legend, he once asked God, in order to prove His existence, to strike him down on the spot. Later, Mussolini always cited the name of God in his speeches, and did not mind being called the Man of Providence.

Italian fascism was the first right-wing dictatorship that took over a European country, and all similar movements later found a sort of archetype in Mussolini's regime. Italian fascism was the first to establish a military liturgy, a folklore, even a way of dressing—far more influential, with its black shirts, than Armani, Benetton, or Versace would ever be. It was only in the Thirties that fascist movements appeared, with Mosley, in Great Britain, and in Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Yugoslavia, Spain, Portugal, Norway, and even in South America. It was Italian fascism that convinced many European liberal leaders that the new regime was carrying out interesting social reform, and that it was providing a mildly revolutionary alternative to the Communist threat.

Nevertheless, historical priority does not seem to me a sufficient reason to explain why the word *fascism* became a synecdoche, that is, a word that could be used for different totalitarian movements. This is not because fascism contained in itself, so to speak in their quintessential

state, all the elements of any later form of totalitarianism. On the contrary, fascism had no quintessence. Fascism was a *fuzzy* totalitarianism, a collage of different philosophical and political ideas, a beehive of contradictions. Can one conceive of a truly totalitarian movement that was able to combine monarchy with revolution, the Royal Army with Mussolini's personal *milizia*, the grant of privileges to the Church with state education extolling violence, absolute state control with a free market? The Fascist Party was born boasting that it brought a revolutionary new order; but it was financed by the most conservative among the landowners who expected from it a counter-revolution. At its beginning fascism was republican. Yet it survived for twenty years proclaiming its loyalty to the royal family, while the Duce (the unchallenged Maximal Leader) was arm-in-arm with the King, to whom he also offered the title of Emperor. But when the King fired Mussolini in 1943, the party reappeared two months later, with German support, under the standard of a "social" republic, recycling its old revolutionary script, now enriched with almost Jacobin overtones.

There was only a single Nazi architecture and a single Nazi art. If the Nazi architect was Albert Speer, there was no more room for Mies van der Rohe. Similarly, under Stalin's rule, if Lamarck was right there was no room for Darwin. In Italy there were certainly fascist architects but close to their pseudo-Coliseums were many new buildings inspired by the modern rationalism of Gropius.

There was no fascist Zhdanov setting a strictly cultural line. In Italy there were two important art awards. The Premio Cremona was controlled by a fanatical and uncultivated Fascist, Roberto Farinacci, who encouraged art as propaganda. (I can remember paintings with such titles as *Listening by Radio to the Duce's Speech or States of Mind Created by Fascism*.) The Premio Bergamo was sponsored by the cultivated and reasonably tolerant Fascist Giuseppe Bottai, who protected both the concept of art for art's sake and the many kinds of avant-garde art that had been banned as corrupt and crypto-Communist in Germany.

The national poet was D'Annunzio, a dandy who in Germany or in Russia would have been sent to the firing squad. He was appointed as the bard of the regime because of his nationalism and his cult of heroism—which were in fact abundantly mixed up with influences of French *fin de siècle* decadence.

Take Futurism. One might think it would have been considered an instance of *entartete Kunst*, along with Expressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism. But the early Italian Futurists were nationalist; they favored Italian participation in the First World War for aesthetic reasons; they celebrated speed, violence, and risk, all of which somehow seemed to connect with the fascist cult of youth. While fascism identified itself with the Roman Empire and rediscovered rural traditions, Marinetti (who proclaimed that a car was more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*, and wanted to kill even the moonlight) was nevertheless appointed as a member of the Italian Academy, which treated moonlight with great respect.

Many of the future partisans and of the future intellectuals of the Communist Party were educated by the GUF, the fascist university students' association, which was supposed to be the cradle of the new fascist culture. These clubs became a sort of intellectual melting pot where new ideas circulated without any real ideological control. It was not that the men of the party were tolerant of radical thinking, but few of them had the intellectual equipment to control it.

During those twenty years, the poetry of Montale and other writers associated with the group called the Ermetici was a reaction to the bombastic style of the regime, and these poets were allowed to develop their literary protest from within what was seen as their ivory tower. The mood of the Ermetici poets was exactly the reverse of the fascist cult of optimism and heroism. The regime tolerated their blatant, even though socially imperceptible, dissent because the Fascists simply did not pay attention to such arcane language.

All this does not mean that Italian fascism was tolerant. Gramsci was put in prison until his death; the opposition leaders Giacomo Matteotti and the brothers Rosselli were assassinated; the free press was abolished, the labor unions were dismantled, and political dissenters were confined on remote islands. Legislative power became a mere fiction and the executive power (which controlled the judiciary as well as the mass media) directly issued new laws, among them laws calling for preservation of the race (the formal Italian gesture of support for what became the Holocaust).

The contradictory picture I describe was not the result of tolerance but of political and ideological discombobulation. But it was a rigid discombobulation, a structured confusion. Fascism was philosophically out of joint, but emotionally it was firmly fastened to some archetypal foundations.

So we come to my second point. There was only one Nazism. We cannot label Franco's hyper-Catholic Falangism as Nazism, since Nazism is fundamentally pagan, polytheistic, and anti-Christian. But the fascist game can be played in many forms, and the name of the game does not change. The notion of fascism is not unlike Wittgenstein's notion of a game. A game can be either competitive or not, it can require some special skill or none, it can or cannot involve money. Games are different activities that display only some "family resemblance," as Wittgenstein put it. Consider the following sequence:

1 2 3 4

abc bcd cde def

Suppose there is a series of political groups in which group one is characterized by the features *abc*, group two by the features *bcd*, and so on. Group two is similar to group one since they have two features in common; for the same reasons three is similar to two and four is similar to three. Notice that three is also similar to one (they have in common the feature *c*). The most curious case is presented by four, obviously similar to three and two, but with no feature in common with one. However, owing to the uninterrupted series of decreasing similarities between one and four, there remains, by a sort of illusory transitivity, a family resemblance between four and one.

Fascism became an all-purpose term because one can eliminate from a fascist regime one or more features, and it will still be recognizable as fascist. Take away imperialism from fascism and you still have Franco and Salazar. Take away colonialism and you still have the Balkan fascism of the Ustashes. Add to the Italian fascism a radical anti-capitalism (which never much fascinated Mussolini) and you have Ezra Pound. Add a cult of Celtic mythology and the Grail

mysticism (completely alien to official fascism) and you have one of the most respected fascist gurus, Julius Evola.

But in spite of this fuzziness, I think it is possible to outline a list of features that are typical of what I would like to call Ur-Fascism, or Eternal Fascism. These features cannot be organized into a system; many of them contradict each other, and are also typical of other kinds of despotism or fanaticism. But it is enough that one of them be present to allow fascism to coagulate around it.

1. The first feature of Ur-Fascism is the *cult of tradition*. Traditionalism is of course much older than fascism. Not only was it typical of counter-revolutionary Catholic thought after the French revolution, but it was born in the late Hellenistic era, as a reaction to classical Greek rationalism. In the Mediterranean basin, people of different religions (most of them indulgently accepted by the Roman Pantheon) started dreaming of a revelation received at the dawn of human history. This revelation, according to the traditionalist mystique, had remained for a long time concealed under the veil of forgotten languages—in Egyptian hieroglyphs, in the Celtic runes, in the scrolls of the little known religions of Asia.

This new culture had to be *syncretistic*. Syncretism is not only, as the dictionary says, "the combination of different forms of belief or practice"; such a combination must tolerate contradictions. Each of the original messages contains a silver of wisdom, and whenever they seem to say different or incompatible things it is only because all are alluding, allegorically, to the same primeval truth.

As a consequence, there can be no advancement of learning. Truth has been already spelled out once and for all, and we can only keep interpreting its obscure message.

One has only to look at the syllabus of every fascist movement to find the major traditionalist thinkers. The Nazi gnosis was nourished by traditionalist, syncretistic, occult elements. The most influential theoretical source of the theories of the new Italian right, Julius Evola, merged the Holy Grail with *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, alchemy with the Holy Roman and Germanic Empire. The very fact that the Italian right, in order to show its open-mindedness, recently broadened its syllabus to include works by De Maistre, Guenon, and Gramsci, is a blatant proof of syncretism.

If you browse in the shelves that, in American bookstores, are labeled as New Age, you can find there even Saint Augustine who, as far as I know, was not a fascist. But combining Saint Augustine and Stonehenge—*that* is a symptom of Ur-Fascism.

2. Traditionalism implies the *rejection of modernism*. Both Fascists and Nazis worshiped technology, while traditionalist thinkers usually reject it as a negation of traditional spiritual values. However, even though Nazism was proud of its industrial achievements, its praise of modernism was only the surface of an ideology based upon Blood and Earth (*Blut und Boden*). The rejection of the modern world was disguised as a rebuttal of the capitalistic way of life, but it mainly concerned the rejection of the Spirit of 1789 (and of 1776, of course). The Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, is seen as the beginning of modern depravity. In this sense Ur-Fascism can be defined as *irrationalism*.

3. Irrationalism also depends on the cult of *action for action's sake*. Action being beautiful in itself, it must be taken before, or without, any previous reflection. Thinking is a form of emasculation. Therefore culture is suspect insofar as it is identified with critical attitudes. Distrust of the intellectual world has always been a symptom of Ur-Fascism, from Goering's alleged statement ("When I hear talk of culture I reach for my gun") to the frequent use of such expressions as "degenerate intellectuals," "eggheads," "effete snobs," "universities are a nest of reds." The official Fascist intellectuals were mainly engaged in attacking modern culture and the liberal intelligentsia for having betrayed traditional values.

4. No syncretistic faith can withstand analytical criticism. The critical spirit makes distinctions, and to distinguish is a sign of modernism. In modern culture the scientific community praises disagreement as a way to improve knowledge. For Ur-Fascism, disagreement is treason.

5. Besides, disagreement is a sign of diversity. Ur-Fascism grows up and seeks for consensus by exploiting and exacerbating the natural *fear of difference*. The first appeal of a fascist or prematurely fascist movement is an appeal against the intruders. Thus Ur-Fascism is racist by definition.

6. Ur-Fascism derives from individual or social frustration. That is why one of the most typical features of the historical fascism was the *appeal to a frustrated middle class*, a class suffering from an economic crisis or feelings of political humiliation, and frightened by the pressure of lower social groups. In our time, when the old "proletarians" are becoming petty bourgeois (and the lumpen are largely excluded from the political scene), the fascism of tomorrow will find its audience in this new majority.

7. To people who feel deprived of a clear social identity, Ur-Fascism says that their only privilege is the most common one, to be born in the same country. This is the origin of nationalism. Besides, the only ones who can provide an identity to the nation are its enemies. Thus at the root of the Ur-Fascist psychology there is the *obsession with a plot*, possibly an international one. The followers must feel besieged. The easiest way to solve the plot is the appeal to xenophobia. But the plot must also come from the inside: Jews are usually the best target because they have the advantage of being at the same time inside and outside. In the US, a prominent instance of the plot obsession is to be found in Pat Robertson's *The New World Order*, but, as we have recently seen, there are many others.

8. The followers must feel humiliated by the ostentatious wealth and force of their enemies. When I was a boy I was taught to think of Englishmen as the five-meal people. They ate more frequently than the poor but sober Italians. Jews are rich and help each other through a secret web of mutual assistance. However, the followers must be convinced that they can overwhelm the enemies. Thus, by a continuous shifting of rhetorical focus, the enemies are at the same time too strong and too weak. Fascist governments are condemned to lose wars because they are constitutionally incapable of objectively evaluating the force of the enemy.

9. For Ur-Fascism there is no struggle for life but, rather, life is lived for struggle. Thus *pacifism is trafficking with the enemy*. It is bad because *life is permanent warfare*. This, however, brings about an Armageddon complex. Since enemies have to be defeated, there must be a final battle, after which the movement will have control of the world. But such a "final solution" implies a

further era of peace, a Golden Age, which contradicts the principle of permanent war. No fascist leader has ever succeeded in solving this predicament.

10. Elitism is a typical aspect of any reactionary ideology, insofar as it is fundamentally aristocratic, and aristocratic and militaristic elitism cruelly implies *contempt for the weak*. Ur-Fascism can only advocate a *popular elitism*. Every citizen belongs to the best people of the world, the members of the party are the best among the citizens, every citizen can (or ought to) become a member of the party. But there cannot be patricians without plebeians. In fact, the Leader, knowing that his power was not delegated to him democratically but was conquered by force, also knows that his force is based upon the weakness of the masses; they are so weak as to need and deserve a ruler. Since the group is hierarchically organized (according to a military model), every subordinate leader despises his own underlings, and each of them despises his inferiors. This reinforces the sense of mass elitism.

11. In such a perspective *everybody is educated to become a hero*. In every mythology the hero is an exceptional being, but in Ur-Fascist ideology, heroism is the norm. This cult of heroism is strictly linked with the cult of death. It is not by chance that a motto of the Falangists was *Viva la Muerte* (in English it should be translated as "Long Live Death!"). In non-fascist societies, the lay public is told that death is unpleasant but must be faced with dignity; believers are told that it is the painful way to reach a supernatural happiness. By contrast, the Ur-Fascist hero craves heroic death, advertised as the best reward for a heroic life. The Ur-Fascist hero is impatient to die. In his impatience, he more frequently sends other people to death.

12. Since both permanent war and heroism are difficult games to play, the Ur-Fascist transfers his will to power to sexual matters. This is the origin of *machismo* (which implies both disdain for women and intolerance and condemnation of nonstandard sexual habits, from chastity to homosexuality). Since even sex is a difficult game to play, the Ur-Fascist hero tends to play with weapons—doing so becomes an ersatz phallic exercise.

13. Ur-Fascism is based upon a *selective populism*, a qualitative populism, one might say. In a democracy, the citizens have individual rights, but the citizens in their entirety have a political impact only from a quantitative point of view—one follows the decisions of the majority. For Ur-Fascism, however, individuals as individuals have no rights, and the People is conceived as a quality, a monolithic entity expressing the Common Will. Since no large quantity of human beings can have a common will, the Leader pretends to be their interpreter. Having lost their power of delegation, citizens do not act; they are only called on to play the role of the People. Thus the People is only a theatrical fiction. To have a good instance of qualitative populism we no longer need the Piazza Venezia in Rome or the Nuremberg Stadium. There is in our future a TV or Internet populism, in which the emotional response of a selected group of citizens can be presented and accepted as the Voice of the People.

Because of its qualitative populism Ur-Fascism must be *against "rotten" parliamentary governments*. One of the first sentences uttered by Mussolini in the Italian parliament was "I could have transformed this deaf and gloomy place into a bivouac for my maniples"—"maniples" being a subdivision of the traditional Roman legion. As a matter of fact, he immediately found better housing for his maniples, but a little later he liquidated the parliament.

Wherever a politician casts doubt on the legitimacy of a parliament because it no longer represents the Voice of the People, we can smell Ur-Fascism.

14. Ur-Fascism speaks Newspeak. Newspeak was invented by Orwell, in *1984*, as the official language of Ingsoc, English Socialism. But elements of Ur-Fascism are common to different forms of dictatorship. All the Nazi or Fascist schoolbooks made use of an impoverished vocabulary, and an elementary syntax, in order to limit the instruments for complex and critical reasoning. But we must be ready to identify other kinds of Newspeak, even if they take the apparently innocent form of a popular talk show.

On the morning of July 27, 1943, I was told that, according to radio reports, fascism had collapsed and Mussolini was under arrest. When my mother sent me out to buy the newspaper, I saw that the papers at the nearest newsstand had different titles. Moreover, after seeing the headlines, I realized that each newspaper said different things. I bought one of them, blindly, and read a message on the first page signed by five or six political parties—among them the Democrazia Cristiana, the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, the Partito d'Azione, and the Liberal Party.

Until then, I had believed that there was a single party in every country and that in Italy it was the Partito Nazionale Fascista. Now I was discovering that in my country several parties could exist at the same time. Since I was a clever boy, I immediately realized that so many parties could not have been born overnight, and they must have existed for some time as clandestine organizations.

The message on the front celebrated the end of the dictatorship and the return of freedom: freedom of speech, of press, of political association. These words, "freedom," "dictatorship," "liberty,"—I now read them for the first time in my life. I was reborn as a free Western man by virtue of these new words.

We must keep alert, so that the sense of these words will not be forgotten again. Ur-Fascism is still around us, sometimes in plainclothes. It would be so much easier, for us, if there appeared on the world scene somebody saying, "I want to reopen Auschwitz, I want the Black Shirts to parade again in the Italian squares." Life is not that simple. Ur-Fascism can come back under the most innocent of disguises. Our duty is to uncover it and to point our finger at any of its new instances—every day, in every part of the world. Franklin Roosevelt's words of November 4, 1938, are worth recalling: "I venture the challenging statement that if American democracy ceases to move forward as a living force, seeking day and night by peaceful means to better the lot of our citizens, fascism will grow in strength in our land." Freedom and liberation are an unending task.

Let me finish with a poem by Franco Fortini:

Sulla spalletta del ponte
Le teste degli impiccati
Nell'acqua della fonte
La bava degli impiccati.

Sul lastrico del mercato
Le unghie dei fucilati
Sull'erba secca del prato
I denti dei fucilati.

Mordere l'aria mordere i sassi
La nostra carne non è più d'uomini
Mordere l'aria mordere i sassi
Il nostro cuore non è più d'uomini.

Ma noi s'è letto negli occhi dei morti
E sulla terra faremo libertà
Ma l'hanno stretta i pugni dei morti
La giustizia che si farà.

* * *

(On the bridge's parapet
The heads of the hanged
In the flowing rivulet
The spittle of the hanged.
On the cobbles in the market- places
The fingernails of those lined up and shot
On the dry grass in the open spaces
The broken teeth of those lined up and shot.

Biting the air, biting the stones
Our flesh is no longer human
Biting the air, biting the stones
Our hearts are no longer human.

But we have read into the eyes of the dead
And shall bring freedom on the earth
But clenched tight in the fists of the dead
Lies the justice to be served.)
—poem translated by Stephen Sartarelli

Copyright © by Umberto Eco